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The religious development
of Joris Karl Huysmans as
shown by a study of his works

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THE RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT OF JORIS KARL HUYSMANS
AS SHOWN BY A STUDY OF HIS WORKS

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BY

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A. B. Bryn Mawr College, 1908

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

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I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY

Margaret Steel Duncan

ENTITLED The Religious Development of Joris-Karl

Huysmans as shown by a study of his Works.

BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE

DEGREE OF Master of Arts.

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P R E F A C E .

When an author whose works have for many years proved him an ardent disciple of the naturalistic school of writing and of the pessimistic school of philosophy suddenly announces to the world that he has become converted to the Catholic faith and thenceforth devotes himself to the symbolistic school of literature, it is naturally somewhat of a surprise to his contemporaries. This is exactly what has happened in the case of Joris-Karl Huysmans, and as a result he has been looked upon by many as an enigma and has been the object of much controversy. Was this changed attitude the outcome of conviction or was it a mere artistic device to gain literary notoriety?

It is with the idea of coming to a more accurate solution of this problem that the following study of Huysmans' work is presented. In order to have a basis for the discussion we have taken a brief look at the life of the author.



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INTRODUCTION.

Joris-Karl Huysmans was born at Paris February 5, 1848. He came fairly by his love of art, for his father, a native of Breda, Holland, was a lithographer and painter, and claimed as a forbear the painter of the seventeenth century, Huysmans of Mechlin. His mother, of Burgundian stock, laid proud claim to a sculptor in her ancestral line. They sent their son to the Lycée Saint Louis. He studied law, but at an early age, about 1868, entered the Department of the Interior where he remained until 1897. He is described as a "model unassuming official, fond of first editions, posters, rare prints, and a few intimates." * About 1874 he began to devote much of his time to literature, and all of his spare moments at his desk were given over to his books. In 1897 he went to live at Ligugé, but after the expulsion of the Benedictines returned to Paris. He was elected first President of the Academy Goncourt, April 7, 1900, and was nominated Chevalier of the Legion of Honor and given the rosette of officer by M. A. Briand. The latter honor it must be remembered however, was given him not because of his literary achievements, but in recognition of his faithful work as a civil servant.

Huysmans had always suffered from neuralgia and dyspepsia, but towards the close of his life was attacked with cancer, and suffered the agonies which he so often portrayed with such

* Huneker J., Egoists, A Book of Supermen, Page 177.

distressing detail and accuracy in his lives of the saints. He was partially blind for a few months before his death, though his sufferings were relieved by the almost constant attendance of Léon Daudet and Francois Coppée who were his devoted friends until the end. Huysmans refused anaesthetics because he wished to suffer for his life of sin, above all to suffer for his early writings, for he repudiated absolutely his first books. * He was buried in his Benedictine garb, for he had begged that he should have no military honors at his funeral. He left his money principally to charities.

This is the life of the man to whose books we are now to turn.

*Huneker J., Egoists, A BOOK of Supermen, Page 205.

Huysmans' first works show the naturalistic bent of the writer, and the disciple of Zola's school is clearly evidenced. In *Marthe*, his second appearance in the literary world, 1876, he says, "I write what I see, what I feel and what I have experienced, and I write it as well as I can; that's all." This is the ideal towards which he strove in all of his work, despite his spiritual change and the resultant swerving from pessimistic naturalism to symbolic mysticism. Remy de Gourmont called him an "eye", and truly Huysmans' descriptive power is inimitable. He is an artist who uses pen and word in place of brush and color. The change in his books lies merely in the choice of the subject for his painting.

His earlier novels prove him a pessimist of the most ironical type. He can see nothing but the weedy side of life, the ugliness in the world, the paltriness of ambition. His greatest talent lies in his power to depict the history of the human soul, but his early effort is directed only towards the man who is tired of life, who seeks to gain some peace of mind and comfort of body and never succeeds. The trite, the dull, the unhappy, this is the man of Huysmans' field of action, and he plainly despises him while he glories in describing his bovine stupidity. Our author is like the Dutch painters of the old school who expended their artistic skill and their beautiful colors in painting the carrot and cabbage side of nature.

When, however, we come to En Route, published in 1895, we find heralded a decided reaction from this hopeless, pessimistic attitude to one of hopeful confidence. En Route and Huysmans'

later books have attracted especial wide-spread attention because they openly evince a complete change of mind on the part of the author, and they depict the Catholic Church with all its mystic beauty and deep symbolism, though by no means in unmixt praise. Its orders are brought to critical judgment, its music, its pictures, even its crucifixes and its priests are at times assailed. Then too, naturalism has left its distinctive imprint upon the writer's style. His picturesque, even slangy treatment of his sacred subject has brought him the condemnation of many of the thoughtful minds of his land and of his church. At the time of his death his reputation had suffered an eclipse; he was distrusted both by Catholics and by Free-thinkers. They claimed his conversion to be a literary hoax, a new and spectacular attempt at advertising. There are others, however, who have taken up the cudgels in his defense, claiming his intentions to be of the best, his attitude one of genuine devotion to the faith.

We shall need to know some of the characteristics of Huysmans himself, and to carefully study his books, before we can come to any tenable conclusion, and such is the task to which we shall now bend our efforts.

"Some interviewer once wrote of Huysmans", says Mr. Arthur Symonds, "He gave me the impression of a cat, courteous, perfectly polite, almost amiable, but all nerves, ready to shoot out his claws at the least word." * Mr Symonds himself who saw Huysmans in 1892, three years before the publication of En Route, says

*Symonds, Arthur, The Symbolistic Movement in Literature, page 138.

of him, "And indeed there is something of his favorite animal (i.e. the cat) about him. The face is grey, wearily alert, with a look of benevolent malice. It is always the unpleasant aspect of things that he seizes, but the intensity of his revolt from that unpleasantness brings a touch of the sublime into the very expression of his disgust. Every sentence is an epigram and every epigram slaughters a reputation or an idea. He speaks with an accent of pained surprise, an amused look of contempt, so profound that it becomes almost pity for human imbecility." *

This is the impression produced upon an observant interviewer. Our next question is naturally, "What do his friends think of him?" and we are fortunate enough to have the written evidence of one of them too.

Remy de Gourmont, one of the French critics of this time, was on terms of intimacy with Huysmans for several years before the change which led our author to frequent the church and the monk's cell in preference to the restaurant and the street. The following are extracts from his word picture of his friend: "L'image singulière, la métaphore brutale venaient spontanément sous sa plume. Son style parlé, du reste, ressemblait tout à fait à son style écrit, preuve que sa manière tourmentée était le reflet naturel de son caractère inquiet, curieux du rare, de l'inédit et de l'impossible. Sûr de son auditeur, il laissait tomber goutte à goutte ses mépris, ses rancœurs, ses haines, ses dégoûts, déchirant à la fois l'Eglise et la littérature, la jeunesse et ses contemporains, la peinture, la critique et les

* Symons, Arthur, The Symbolistic Movement in Literature, Page 188.

journaux. Un recueil de ces conversations serait le plus curieux tableau satirique du ~~####~~ Paris de vers 1890. Les jugements littéraires étaient d'une méchanceté vraiment excessive, et peut-être pas tout à fait exempts d'une certaine rancune. Hélas! j'ai su qu'à ces mêmes écrivains bafoués en paroles, il envoyait volontiers, à l'occasion, d'aimables lettres. J'en eus la preuve un jour qu'une de nos meilleures romancières me montrait avec émotion un billet de Huysmans des plus chaleureux: la veille, il m'avait entretenu de cette dame en termes horribles, l'appelant, on ne sait pourquoi, la fille de brasserie, la belle Juive! Tout cela pour le plaisir de faire des vots, de dérouiller sa verve, muette depuis vingt-quatre heures! Tout cela sans méchanceté foncière, tout cela par jeu, aiguissant ses griffes sur les réputations comme son chat les exerçait sur ses fauteuils et sur ses rideaux! Quelle étrange caractère! au même moment qu'il couvrait d'injures intimes un de ses familiers, M. G. G.***, il lui rendait les services les plus délicats!" *

Our two pictures are surely but two views of the same man. His sharp tongue assails at every turn. It is his distinctive feature, as Cyrano de Bergerac's nose was his, and surely Huysmans has the more disfiguring defect. His friend however shows us the more lovable side of his nature. Our author's hand is the agent of a generous heart though his tongue is the spokesman of a pessimist's brain; but for our study this knowledge is not the most significant gain from these two pictures. Their

* Remy de Gourmont, Promenades Littéraires, Troisième Série, pp. 7, 11, 12, 13.

greatest importance for us lies in the proof they give that the man we find pictured in Huysman's books is not a creature of his imagination, he is Huysmans himself. Really one can find in Remy de Courmont's short sketch of his friend practically the outline of all of his books up to the time of his so-called conversion. Huysmans is a pessimist. He hates life and its wearisome monotony. He sees in no man anything but stupid mediocrity. He is the recording-secretary of the petty miseries and ironies of the life about him, and his books are never anything but a reproduction of his own thoughts. Of humor there is absolutely none, there is not even any attempt at a story, and with the exception of Durtal, who is Huysmans himself, the observer, the describer, the characters are simply silhouettes which pass over the pages.

Since we find that the Huysmans whom the interviewers studied and whom his friends knew is, without variation, without gloss or detraction the Huysmans of his books, we are justified, it would seem, in trying to come to some conclusion concerning his religious conversion from a study of these works.

We are studying a man of an exceedingly nervous and artistic temperament, one especially susceptible to sense impressions notably those of sight and smell, a man reveling in symbolism, but above all things else an artist and a critic. It is this artistic nervous, sensuous temperament that finally came into contact with the harmonious beauty of the Catholic church. Surely it was a nature especially made to respond to such a touch. This is his own witness: "Enfin Durtal (and that is Huysmans) avait été ramené

à la religion par l'art. Plus que son dégoût de la vie même, l'art avait été l'irrésistible arant qui l'avait attiré vers Dieu." *

But was this conversion a matter of a moment, a sudden yielding of mind and soul to sense impression? Such seems to be the stand of friends and foes alike. A careful study of the author's work will, we hope, prove the contrary, as well as the sincerity of the change.

The hopeless pessimism of Huysmans' early work is unspeakably sad. Its expression sinks at times as in A Vau l'Eau to the very depths of discouragement. "Schopenhauer a raison", se dit-il, " la vie de l'homme oscille comme un pendule entre la douleur et l'ennui. Aussi n'est-ce point la peine de tenter d' accélérer ou de retarder la marche du balancier; il n'y a qu'à se croiser les bras et à tâcher de dormir ***** Allons, décidément, le mieux n'existe pas pour les gens sans le sou; ceul le pire arrive."** Deep-rooted pessimism is this, and it is the depressing atmosphere which enshrouds all of Huysmans early work.

Little emotions and little souls are all that he can see in this great world of ours. One book deals with the coarse, crude, unhappy life of two mill girls. Another has as its whole theme the efforts of a middle-aged dyspeptic to find a restaurant where he can have his mutton chops served unburnt.

* Huysmans, Preface to A Rebours, Page 7.

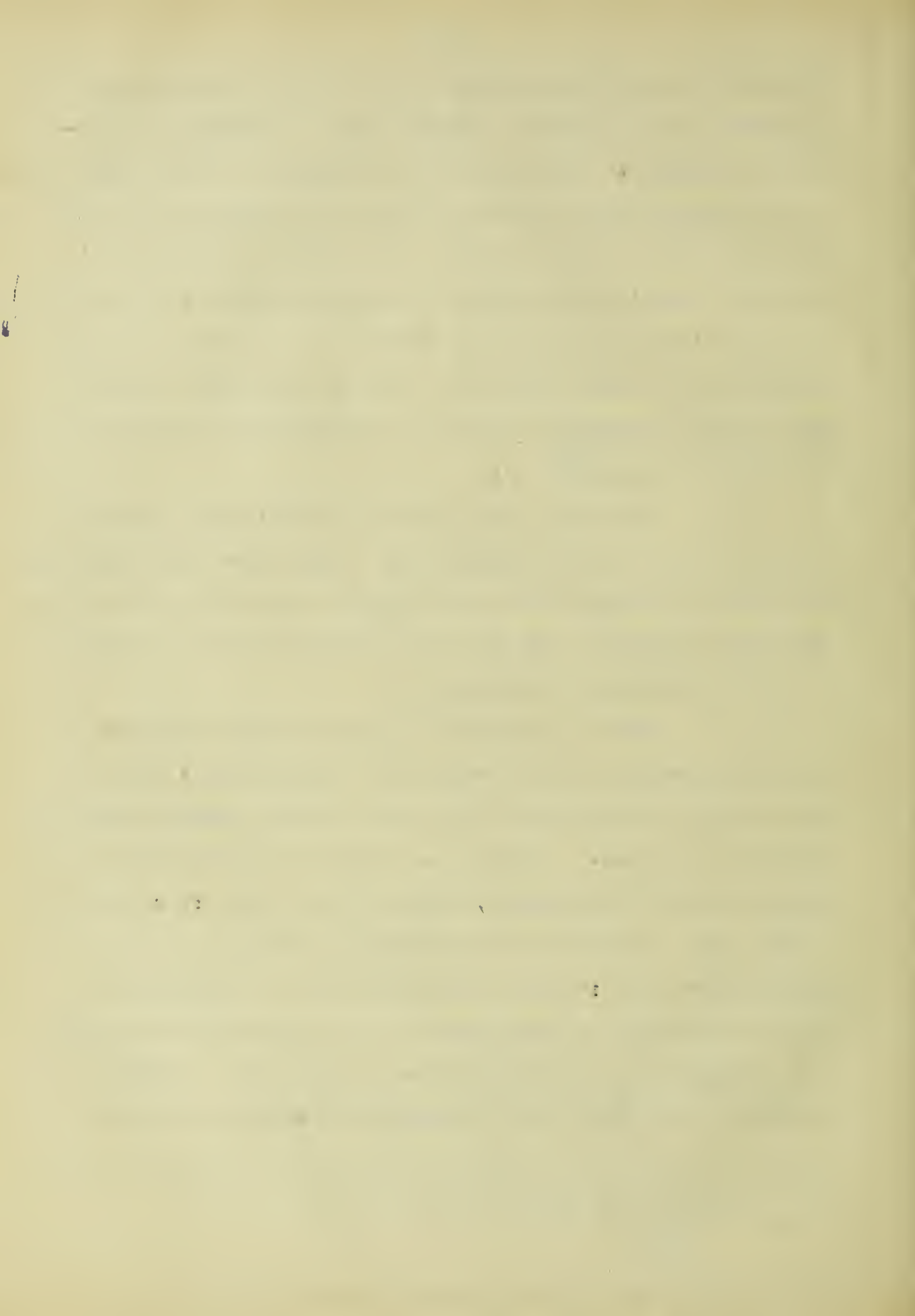
** Huysmans, A Vau-l'Eau, page 240.

The author detects the malady in the world, he recognizes the symptoms, but he does not realize that the presence of illness presupposes the possibility of health. For him this, an excerpt from En Ménage (1881) portrays the average mind. "Mais dans les salons, dans le monde, les cartes ne servent qu'à masquer la misère des propos, la faiblesse des intelligences, la nullité des personnes qui, réunies entre elles ne peuvent rien se dire; c'est prodigieux tout de même comme l'ineptie des classes bourgeoises trouve son compte dans le silence d'une partie de wisth^(sic)." (1)

Once in a long interval he will grant you that there are some people comparatively happy, some still blinded by a bit of illusion, but on the whole we are but unfortunates eternally searching for our bit of bread by which we may continue the miserable existence.

Yet in the midst of this blackest pessimism one already glimpses the road which this harassed mind will one day follow. Through a rift like this one may catch a gleam of the light to come. As early as 1880 he wrote in speaking of the Overture to Tannhauser, "Et ce chant, sans effusions féminines, sans câlines prières s'efforçant d'obtenir par les hasardeuses singeries de la grace moderne le rendez-vous réservé d'un Dieu, se développe avec cette certitude de rachat qui s'imposèrent aux humbles âmes du Moyen Age. Adorant et superbe, mâle ^{et} ~~and~~ probe, il déduit l'épouvantable fatigue

(1) Huysmans, En Ménage, Page 158.



du pécheur descendu dans les caves de sa conscience, l'in-
altérable dégoût du voyant spirituel mis en face des iniqui-
tés et des ~~affaires~~ ^{affaires} accumulées dans ces redoutes, et il affirme
aussi, après le cri de foi dans la rédemption, le bonheur ~~sur-~~
surhumain d'une vie nouvelle, l'indicible allégresse d'un
coeur neuf éclairé tel qu'un Thabor, par les rayons de la mys-
tique Superessence." ⁽⁶⁾ Think of that thus early in the work of
this unbelieving pessimist. If we are skeptical, we may be-
lieve it written only for effect. People assuredly can both
say and write things which they by no means feel or believe.
Moreover this lofty strain is but momentary at this stage of
our author's thought. We must however presuppose that he had
spent thought upon the theme, else he could never have writ-
ten it at all, even insincerely.

Already in A Vau-l'Eau (1882) we see even a more
striking trace of the bent which Huysmans' development is to
take. Folatin hears of the death of a cousin of his who had
become a nun. He, in the depth of his gloomy sophistry, sudden-
ly hears that his last relative is gone, and the blow is
greater than he suspected it would be. He feels more alone
now than ever, and here is his thought: "Il envia sa vie
calme et muette et il regretta la foi qu'il avait perdue. ~~Quel~~
Quelle occupation que la prière, quel passe-temps que la con-
fession, quels débouchés que les pratiques d'un culte! Le
soir, on va à l'église, on s'abîme dans la contemplation, et

et les misères de la vie sont^{de} peu; puis les dimanches s'égouttent dans la longueur des offices, dans l'alanguissement des cantiques et des vêpres, car le spleen n'a pas de prise sur les âmes pieuses.

Oui, mais pourquoi la religion consolatrice, n'est-elle faite que pour les pauvres d'esprit? Pourquoi L'Eglise a-t-elle voulu ériger en dogmes les croyances les plus absurdes? Il est vrai que si l'on avait la foi oui, mais je ne l'ai plus; enfin, l'intolérance du clergé le révoltait. Et pourtant, reprenait-il, la religion pourrait seule panser la plaie qui me tire. - C'est égal, on a tort de démontrer aux fidèles l'inanité de leurs adorations, car ceux-là sont heureux qui acceptent comme une épreuve passagère toutes les traverses, toutes les afflictions de la vie présente. - Ah! la tante Ursule a dû mourir sans regrets, persuadée que des allégresses infinies allaient éclore!" (1)

Here Huysmans certainly does contemplate the possibility of the church as a refuge towards which a tormented mind might one day turn, but he also shows that without faith one cannot take the step. To do so would be to engulf oneself in a pit of mockery and insincerity which would be far more mind-tormenting and soul-racking than the crass materialism and gloomy but sincere pessimism which Follin already endures. As one reads the passage one must be ~~impressed~~ impressed with the fact that Huysmans has by no means satisfied himself that his short sighted realism and dulling pessimism are the only

doctrines to which he can cling. He seems to be constantly feeling around for some way out of the gulf into which he has fallen. He is really swaying not so much between sorrow and utter weariness as between ~~these~~ ~~these~~ these feelings and an indefinite but none the less real longing for some salvation from his insufferable melancholy.

A Rebours written in 1884 seems to be the biggest step he takes in his entire progress towards conversion. Nothing like this book has to my knowledge ever been written, though it approaches most in spirit some of the fantastic flights of Edgar Allen Poe. He seems indeed to have contemplated Poe's aphorism, "All certainly lies in dreams."

It is indisputable that with A Rebours Huysmans breaks with all his preceding work. It is a study in symbolism. Seeking for deliverance from the banalities and the platitudes of the world, and the ruthless gloom which they produce, Huysmans finds it for a time in a kind of Neo-Catholic mysticism of his own creation. A Rebours is the story of a decadent soul. The Duc des Esseintes shuts himself up in a place near Paris, and here he gathers about him all that is rare, beautiful, morbid and fantastic in modern art and literature.

Certainly the author has devoted time and attention now to the symbolism, the art, the literature of the Church. She now occupies much of his thought, whereas before she has hardly seemed to exist for him. A Rebours is ~~not~~ ^{indeed} ~~certainly~~ an exotic production. It is a glare of color, of ar-

tificialty, a product of utter derangement, and of all of Huysmans' books it is the most characteristic. He never excelled such mystifications as those given there in the mouth orchestra which, by the aid of various liquors, gives to the tongue sensations comparable to music, the concerts of flowers and perfume, the mechanical landscape, the mock sea with its machine moved fish.

Since this is Huysmans' most personal achievement, it is of the utmost importance for our theme that we find it so laden with thought both directly and indirectly of the church as a refuge for man's harassed soul. We find whole chapters devoted to her symbolism and literature. The work of many of her writers is entered into in great detail. It matters little if he did, as many of his critics assert, gather all his material from a few learned German compilations. To have gathered so much material and to have incorporated it in his book must have necessitated thought on these things. Le Duc des Esseintes, the hero, or rather merely the man whose thoughts are presented to us, for there is no attempt at anything else, contemplates the advantages of the cloistered life, and shuts himself in from the world as one would do should he finally embrace the faith which would give him entrance into the church. Here again we find the contemplation of a form of life which is permitted one who has the faith. The church is the only portal to the land of relief.

"Tel qu'un hermite, il était mûr pour l'isole-

ment, harassé de la vie, n' attendant plus rien d'elle; tel qu'un moine aussi, il était accablé d'une lassitude immense, d'un besoin de recueillement, d'un désir de ne plus avoir rien de commun avec les profanes qui étaient pour lui les utilitaires et les imbéciles. En résumé, bien qu'il n'éprouvât aucune vocation pour l'état de grâce, il se sentait une réelle sympathie pour ces gens enfermés dans des monastères. (1)

He might almost express himself in king Agrippa's words, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." One moment he believes, turns instinctively to religion for his deliverance, the next his religious inclinations vanish, but he remains, in spite of himself, most deeply troubled.

Huysmans has become inexpressibly weary of the naturalism which turns always in the same circle. He seeks now to find an atmosphere where he may let his imagination play, where he may take refuge far from his time and surroundings in the illusion of extravagant fancies, and he is lead naturally to the time of the Middle Ages, a time which for many is wrapped in a certain mystery and attraction. On reaching this age, then, he was inevitably confronted with the Church. His interest lay in art and in literature. The Church was the mother and preserver of both. She furnished the subjects for both the artists and the writers of that day, and she was the store house of the works they produced. Our author has by no means embraced the faith as yet. In fact he impresses one as being somewhat surprised at the mag-

(1) Huysmans, A Rebours, Page 90.

nitude and glory of the church. He failed to understand how a religion which seemed to him childish could have given rise to the exquisite works which so delighted his senses.

It is remarkable but none the less true, that in A Rebours we find the seed from which most of his startling later books grew. Here are the dim outlines of those wonderful descriptions of the music, of the art, of the symbolism of the church ~~#####~~ depicted with so much detail in En Route, La Cathédrale and L'Oblat.

Des Esseintes finally perceives that the philosophy of pessimism is powerless to soothe. He decides "que l'impossible croyance en une vie future serait seule apaisante,"(1) and the book closes with the hopeless cry which after all embodies a hope, "Seigneur, prenez pitié du chrétien qui doute, de l'incrédule qui voudrait croire, du forçat de la vie qui s'embarque seul, dans la nuit, ~~####~~ ~~###~~ sous un firmament que n'éclairaient plus les consolants fanaux du vieil espoir." (2)

I feel that it is at this time, with A Rebours, that Huysmans gives the first signs of his ultimate return to the church. It is in En Route that he comes boldly to the front as a man of faith, but without all the previous thought and struggle, doubt and fear to open the way, I hardly believe the light of conviction could have found an entrance.

1. Huysmans, A Rebours, Page 293.

2. Ibid, Page 294.

To be sure, when Folatin came to the final summing up of his thoughts and conclusions he still persisted in considering religion a superb legend, a magnificent imposture, yet in spite of all his explanations his scepticism began to yield. Like André in his En Ménage Huysmans finds himself intermittently content, only later to be attacked with the unrest "encore une fois." His own words in A Rebours are "A mesure même que sa faim religieuse s'augmentait, à mesure qu'il appelait de toutes ses forces, cette foi qui se laissait voir, des idées se pressaient dans son esprit toujours en ignition, repoussant sa volonté mal assise, rejetant par des motifs de bon sens, par des preuves de mathématique, les mystères et les dogmes!"(1)

His next book, En Rade, was published in 1887. Here we have once more Huysmans the naturalist 'to the fore'. The book is a dull, commonplace, grimy picture of the life of a man and his wife who have lost all their money and are forced to live in the country until they gather sufficient means to sojourn in the city again. The main impression left upon the reader is Huysmans' intense dislike of nature. The tale is full of fantastic, horrible nightmares, and shows the author's artistic temperament, but the great struggle for some solution to the problem of life seems to have been for the time quieted. His pessimism is once more paramount. "Eh! ce serait la même chose partout, se dit-il, il faudrait

(1) Huysmans, A Rebours, Page 288

no more

être transporté dans une autre planète, et encore, du moment qu'elle serait habitable la misère y serait." (1) Any little touches which have bearing upon the church are rather the touches given by an outsider than by one who contemplates any refuge in the church. They are quite impersonal, the impressions of a mere onlooker. "Il est vrai que Dieu résidait si peu dans cet endroit, car l'abbé gargotait les sacrements, bousculait sa messe, appelait son Seigneur en hâte et le congédiait, dès qu'il était venu, **sans** aucun retard. C'était un service tout à la fois télégraphique et divin, suffisant peut-être pour les trois ou quatre personnes arrivées de Longueville et qui n'osaient s'asseoir, tant les bancs étaient vermoulus et sales!" (2) Huysmans himself does not feel concerned about this state of affairs. He feels neither the disappointment of the faithful nor the glee of the heretic. That is simply the state in which he found the church, and after he has given his picture he has no further concern about it.

His next important publication is a book of Art criticisms, "Certains, (1889), which prove him able in this work, but which are of little value for us, except for a few passages where he deals with Christian symbolism, notably that of the stone figures of Notre-Dame, and regrets that we have lost it almost in its entirety.

1. Huysmans, En Rade, Page 163.

2. Ibid Page 276.

With Là-Bas (1891), however, we are brought to face a great change. Huysmans has taken the leap which brings him outside the bounds of naturalism. He has at last come to see its weakness, and declares that "il faudrait garder la véracité du document, la précision du détail, la langue étoffée et nerveuse du réalisme, mais il faudrait aussi se faire puisatier d'âme et ne pas vouloir expliquer le mystère par les maladies des sens..... Il faudrait, en un mot, suivre la grande voie si profondément creusée par Zola, mais il serait nécessaire aussi de tracer en l'air un chemin parallèle, une autre route, d'atteindre les en deça et les après, de faire, en un mot, un naturalisme spiritualiste ; ce serait autrement fier, autrement ~~complet~~ complet, autrement fort!" (1) Strange it is, but ~~##~~ though it is by the route of devil-worship, even in Là-Bas Huysmans takes a great step towards this spirituality. The book is full of monstrous pictures of the Black Mass and of the spiritual abominations of Satanism, but it is one step further in the direction of the supernatural. When one closes Là-Bas one is convinced that these spiritual fluctuations must soon come to some definite outcome, and it is not a great surprise to find our Durtal in En Route a believing Christian.

He enters a church, his temperament is such that the beauty of the place, the glory of the music, all make the deepest impression upon him. The De Profundis

(1). Huysmans, Là-Bas, Page 6.



stirs his deepest emotions. "Cette requête sublime finissant dans les sanglots au moment où l'âme des voix allait franchir les frontières humaines, tordait les nerfs de Durtal, lui tressailla le coeur. Puis il voulut s'abstraire, s'attacher surtout au sens de la morne plainte où l'être déchu lamentablement implore, en gémissant, son Dieu. Et ces cris de la troisième strophe lui revenaient, ceux, où suppliant, désespéré, du fond de l'abîme, son Sauveur, l'homme, maintenant qu'il se sait écouté, hésite, honteux, ne sachant plus que dire. Les excuses qu'il prépara lui paraissent vaines, les arguments qu'il ajusta lui semblent nuls, et alors il balbutie: 'si Vous tenez compte des iniquités, Seigneur, Seigneur, qui trouvera grace?'" (1)

We are not given the details of the conversion. We left him in Là-Bas in the depths of pessimism and fantastic Satanism. We find him in En Route simply saying "I believe," and all of his later books are the record of his efforts to climb the heights to greater perfection in his christian life. In En Route we get the beginning of the application of his theory of "Spiritual Naturalism" applied to the history of a soul.

Huysmans was born a Catholic. The germ of the faith was within him, and after many false starts, it has come to light. He but reverted to his early faith. He falls into utter despair and weariness because he must live in a world which appears to him a profoundly uncomfortable, un-

pleasant and ridiculous place. His life time of thought and struggle show him the utter emptiness of any philosophy which tries to bring consolation without counting upon a life beyond. He is forced to enter the church as the only place of refuge, but it is through his study of art and literature that he is brought face to face with the church in the first place.

The story of his gradual climb towards greater goodness is the theme of his work from now on. It is a kind of thinking aloud. Every step is taken deliberately, is weighed, approved, condemned, viewed from this side ~~an~~ and from that, and one feels behind all his dry hard reasoning the genuine striving of a soul towards some outcome where it will find peace. The symbolism which he began to develop in A Rehours is now given full sway.

La Cathédrale describes the intermediate stage between Durtal's repentance at La Trappe and his entrance ~~into~~ the Benedictine monastery of Solesmes. There is no action, no humor, no incident, almost no characterization. It is full of beautiful pages, of wonderful descriptions, but Huysmans is no longer the artist of his earlier days. His work no longer has the power that was its most striking characteristic before. It is the silent hidden life of the dreamer and the mystic to which we now turn. Our author never lost his verbal imagination. He still has every picturesque word in his tongue at his command, and where she fails him he can yet create a new word to portray the

exact shade and intensity of his sensation, but he has lost all sense of proportion, and where before he startled, now he wearies.

After a careful reading of La Cathédrale, however, one can hardly question the sincerity of Huysmans' attitude. His faith is unquestioning. The book is full of his sense of his own sin. "A genoux devant Elle (la Vierge), Durtal se déterminait à lui parler, à lui dire:

J'ai peur de l'avenir et de son ciel chargé et j'ai peur de moi-même, car je me dissous dans l'ennui et je m'enlise. Vous m'avez toujours mené par la main jusqu'ici, ne m'abandonnez pas, achevez votre oeuvre. Je sais bien que c'est folie de se préoccuper ainsi du futur car votre Fils l'a déclaré: 'A chaque jour suffit sa peine,' mais cela dépend des tempéraments; ce qui est facile aux uns est^{si} difficile pour les autres; j'ai l'esprit remuant, toujours inquiet, toujours aux écoutes, et quoi que je fasse, il bat la campagne à tâtons et il s'égaré! ramenez-la, tenez-le, près de vous en laissez, bonne Mère, et accordez-moi après tant de fatigues, un gîte!" (1)

In L'Oblat we find Durtal still further "en route". Life is brighter for the Oblat than it ever was before. The church has thrown open to him another world, and endued him with a spirit of trust, and, more convincing yet, of unselfishness. He can include others in his prayers now, and at least at times think of others than himself. L'Oblat deals with the period of Durtal's novitiate, his reception as an oblat, and a study of

modern monastic life up to his forced return to Paris ,
caused by the expulsion of the Benedictines from France.

Huysmans' weariness of the world as he knew it grows deeper and deeper set. He seeks escape from it in the cloister, and when that is denied him he buries himself in contemplation of the lives of the saints, but he is continually climbing. In Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam he shows more and more of the softening effect which his conversion has had upon him. Religion has vested him with a certain human charity in which he was formerly notably lacking. It has softened his contempt for humanity, it has done away with much of his near sighted realism, but the change is gradual, more so even than any selections from his works can show. It is the result of a life time of struggle between despair and a kind of hopeless hope.

Huysmans' early naturalism left its stamp upon him. His style is always glaring, gorgeous, vivid, slangy. The critic never loses himself in the convert. He knows that the church is not free from faults, and his arraignment is oftentimes bitter, but it never belies his faith. He was not a normal man. He had an intense loathing for anything that transgressed his laws of art. Durtal is a believer, but he is just as startling as ever in his disgust at oily, badly cooked food. He is still a Durtal who shudders at the ugly ill-kempt faces of some of his associates, but he is now a Durtal who can see the beauty in the character of his brother who cares for the swine, despite

his physical repulsiveness. To quote Mr. Huneker, "He has often outraged the sensibilities of his co-religionists, who questioned his sincerity after such an exclamation as 'How like a rind of lard I must look!', uttered when he carried a dripping candle in a religious procession. But through the dreary mists of doubtings and black fog of unfaith the lamp of the church, a shining point, drew to it from his chilly ~~ex~~ ecstasies this hedonist." (1)

Huysmans does not revert to his old themes, his style and his thought undergo gradual softening influences. After his conversion he is not the Huysmans of his former life, and he is not the Huysmans of his former books, but he has remained a writer and he has remained a critic. He is not a man easy to satisfy. He has transferred to the spiritual plane all the accuracy, the conscientiousness, the powers of observation, the vivid portrayal which he acquired while still of the naturalistic school. We have followed his course through doubt and waverings from pessimism and naturalism to partial conviction and finally to conversion. His life is one proof of his sincerity, and from our study his works prove to be merely the written witness to the gradual pilgrimage of our author, as a writer and as a critic from the field of naturalism to that of spiritualism, as a man from the doctrine of pessimism without faith to that of religious trust.

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